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Demotivating factors in learning English: the case of Iran

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Abstract

This study investigated the demotivating factors for learning English. A demotivation questionnaire was administered to 421 high school students. The results indicated that (a) Iranian students considered 'Lack of School Facilities', 'overemphasis on grammar', 'long passages' and 'expectancy to use grammatically correct English in the classroom' as strong sources of demotivation, (b) 'Learning Contents and Materials' and 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles' are moderate sources of demotivation and (c) statistically significant differences were found between girls and boys in general and with respect to 'Learning Contents and Materials' and 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles'.

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Keywords: Demotivation; Learning Materials; school facilities; Teachers' Competence; Teaching Styles

1. Introduction

Students in schools are losing their motivation to learn English and are becoming more demotivated as time goes by. Demotivation has become frequent in schools and the number of demotivated learners is increasing. So, this study tried to shed light on some 'potential motivational pitfalls and danger zones' (Dörnyei, 2001b). Research on motivation in general conceptualizes "a 'motive' as a kind of 'inducement,' that is, as a positive force whose strength ranges on a continuum from zero to strong" (Dörnyei, 2001a, p.50). Nevertheless, very little is usually said about other influences that have a negative effect on motivation. These influences are called demotivating influences. Teachers' and students' experiences suggest that certain negative influences, or demotives can also have a significant effect on motivation. Dörnyei defines demotivation as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action" (2001b, p. 143).

Thus, demotivation can be regarded as the negative counterpart of motivation. Likewise, demotives can be considered as the negative counterparts of motives. Moreover, a demotivated learner is someone who has lost his interest for some reason. The loss of interest can originate from different sources of demotivation. For instance, an unprepared teacher or an uninteresting textbook can act as a demotive for a learner. However, not all researchers agree that demotivation is only external. Many researchers (e.g., Arai, 2004, Falout & Maruyama, 2004 and Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) go on to expand Dörnyei's original definition to cover both external and internal factors (i. e., demotivators) which reduce or diminish the motivation to study English.

Dörnyei (2001b) mentions that demotivation does not mean that a learner has lost his motivation completely. This only means that a strong negative factor limits the present motivation while other positive motives

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still stay ready to be activated. For instance, a learner may still be highly motivated to learn English, as an international language, even if his teachers were unskilled or malevolent.

Demotivation has direct educational implications and with the increasing importance of learning a foreign language, it seems necessary to investigate the related demotives. Since almost no demotivation studies were conducted in Iran, the findings of other studies on demotivation in other contexts may not be applicable to and representative of Iranian high school students. Therefore, this study sets out to explore this under researched area of L2 motivation; demotivation, among Iranian high school students. It is hoped that this study can shed light on the problems of language education of Iran. This study attempts to find out why students are demotivated in the language classroom in order to facilitate and enhance language learning. Therefore, this study is designed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the percentage of demotivating factors in English classes for Iranian high school students?
- 2) Is there any difference between girls and boys with regard to demotivating factors of learning English separately and in general?

2. Methodology

The participants of this study were 421 girls and boys in second and third grade of four high schools in Iran (Qom). Sakai and Kikuchi's demotivation questionnaire consisting of 21 5-point Likert type questions was administered. The participants were required to choose one of the alternatives: 1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: no idea; 4: agree; and 5: strongly agree. There was also an open-ended question administered separately which asked the students to mention other demotivating factors which were not referred to in the questionnaire. Sakai and Kikuchi's demotivation questionnaire was administered to 421 Iranian students in 4 high schools (2 girls' and 2 boys' high schools) in Qom. The questionnaire was piloted and found to be reliable with a coefficient of 0.81.

3. Results

In order to answer the first research question, the mean and standard deviation of each factor was obtained. To find out whether each factor has been demotivating for learning English, the cutoff point = mean + 0.5 standard deviation (Shavelson, 1996) was determined. Therefore, the scores beyond the cutoff point are regarded as high demotivating factors and those below it show intermediate (moderate) or low demotivation; mean - 0.5 standard deviation indicates low demotivation and the scores in between are indicative of intermediate demotivation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Demotivating Factors

number	Factor	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cut off point
1	Learning Contents and Materials	421	7.48	1.75	$7.48 + 0.87 = 8.35$
2	Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles	421	4.82	1.74	$4.82 + 0.87 = 5.69$
3	Inadequate School Facilities	421	13.44	2.36	$13.44 + 1.18 = 14.62$
4	Lack of Intrinsic Motivation	421	6.85	3.32	$6.85 + 1.66 = 8.51$
5	Test Scores	420	16.12	8.20	$16.12 + 4.1 = 20.22$

Of 421 participants, 30.89% scored high and 42.29% scored medium on factor 1. It shows that one third of the participants accepted 'Learning Contents and Materials' as a high demotivating factor and more than one third of the participants reported it as an intermediate demotivating factor. Therefore, factor 1 was not perceived as a strong demotivating factor for learning English. Descriptive statistics also showed that only 27.1% of participants reported

factor 2 as a high demotivating factor and 40.3% of participants reported factor 2 as an intermediate demotivating factor. Hence, 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles' was not perceived as a high demotivating factor for learning English. In factor 3, descriptive statistics showed that 55.58% of participants scored high and reflected 'Inadequate School Facilities' to be demotivating. Of 421 participants, 30.18% scored high on factor 4 and 37.14% of participants scored high on factor 5. Therefore, 'Lack of Intrinsic Motivation' and 'Test Scores' were not perceived as demotivating factors for learning English.

It is noteworthy that items 1; 'Most of the lessons focused on the grammars', 2 'English passages in the textbooks were too long' and item 5; 'I was expected to use (or speak and write) grammatically correct English' had means higher than 3. Their means were 3.38, 3.03 and 3.55 in order. Thus it can be said that among the items related to factor 1 these three single items were perceived to be demotivating.

To have a clear picture of the frequency of each of demotivating factors, their frequency is depicted in Figure 1.

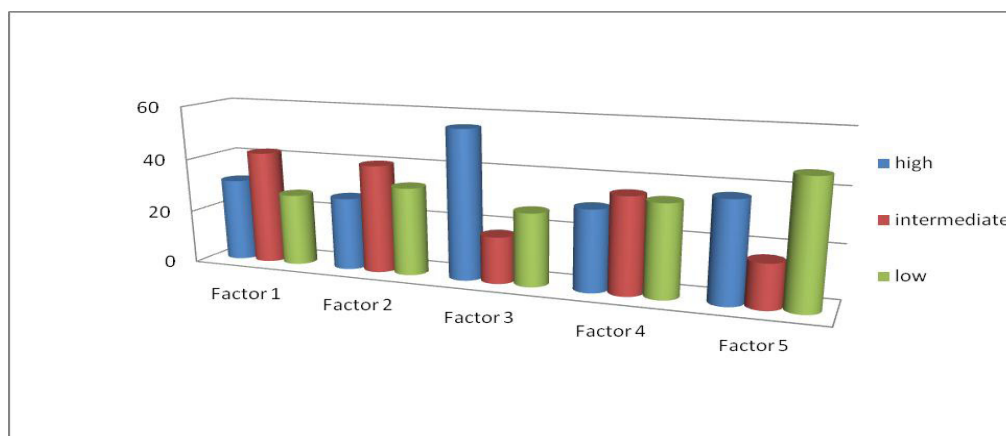


Figure 1: The percentage of participants' perceptions on demotivating factors

To answer the second research question, further analysis by using Independent Samples Tests revealed that there were significant differences between girls and boys with regard to 'Learning Contents and Materials', 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles' and demotivating factors of learning English in general at .05 level of significance ($p \leq 0.05$) (Table 2); boys were more demotivated.

Table 2: Difference between girls and boys on demotivating factors of learning English

Factor	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Learning Contents and Materials	-1.91	419	.056	-.32
Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles	-6.17	419	.000	-1.00
Inadequate School Facilities	1.34	419	.179	.31
Lack of Intrinsic Motivation	1.40	407.39	.162	.45
Test Scores	.37	418	.708	.30
Total	-2.20	419	.028	-.12

In order to find demotivating factors which were not in the questionnaire, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to the subjects. The answers to this question were classified by the researchers. They were related to 'Learning Contents and Materials', 'Teacher', 'The student', 'English Exams', 'English Class or English Lesson' and 'others'. The analysis of this open-ended question demonstrated that 'lack of communicative ability', and

'insufficient sessions during the week' were the other most frequent demotivating factor perceived by students. Less frequently than the above, 'poor methods of teaching' and 'very demanding and strict teachers' were found to scale down the students' motivation to learn English in this context.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed that 'Inadequate School Facilities' is strongly demotivating. That is, insufficient school facilities whether on the part of schools or teachers; insufficient use of these facilities by teachers in English classes- can highly discourage students in learning English. This finding is in agreement with Young's (2003) finding that the use of ICT tools in EFL classes can motivate student learning. In this regard, Ayres (2002) reported a definite correlation between students' high motivation and the perceived need of CALL. His study indicated that students perceive CALL related to their needs and they "appreciate and value the learning that they do using the computers" (p. 247). This finding is also in agreement with Greenfield's (2003) finding that 84% of the students who participated in her study indicated a preference for learning English with computers.

Results revealed that there was a trend in Iranian students to consider 'Learning Contents and Materials' and 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles', demotivating factors. Iranian students are also demotivated by the 'lessons that focused on grammar', 'long reading passages' and 'the expectancy to use grammatically correct English in the classroom'. 'Learning Contents and Materials' included both the textbook and the exercise book. 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles' referred to different ways and methods a teacher uses for teaching English and to the teacher's way of organizing things. What appeared to be the most demotivating aspect about learning material was the overemphasis on grammar, long passages and the expectancy of accuracy from students whether in writing or speaking. This finding is in agreement with Sakai and Kikuchi' (2009) finding that 'Learning Contents and Materials' was a demotivating factor for high school students in their study. Chambers (1993) also concluded that learning material (or the textbook) was a powerful demotivating factor along with the teacher. The course book was found as a demotivating factor in Dörnyei's (1998) list of demotivating factors. It is noteworthy that in most of the previous studies on demotivation learners found factors related to teachers as one of the most demotivating factors (e.g., Gorham & Christophel, 1992; Chambers, 1993; Dörnyei, 1998). Taylor (1962) and Hargreaves (1972) studied students' views of their teachers. The categories used in their studies were teaching, personality and discipline. Their results showed that from students' point of view sources of demotivation can be different; that is one student's liking was another student's dislike or demotivation. Aplin (1991) asked students about activities they liked and disliked, and the similar activities were found on both lists. Taylor (1962), Hargreaves (1972) and Aplin (1991) all show demotivation is directly related to individual differences.

In the current study, learners did not perceive 'Lack of Intrinsic Motivation' and 'Test Scores' strong sources of demotivation. The first one lent support to Sakai and Kikuchi's (2009) findings but the second one opposes their findings. In Sakai and Kikuchi's (2009) study, obtaining low test scores was perceived as strongly demotivating for many Japanese high school students, especially for less motivated learners. As noted above, 'Lack of Intrinsic Motivation' was not a demotivating factor for learning English. The analysis also indicated that boys' and girls' perceptions of 'Learning Contents and Materials', 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles' and demotivating factors of learning English in general are statistically different from each other.

Other demotivating factors which were the most frequent ones for last question, were lack of emphasis on conversation inside the class and lack of sufficient sessions during the week. The former is in agreement with Sakai and Kikuchi's (2007 cited in Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) finding which concluded 'Non-Communicative Methods' was one of demotivating factors identified by participants. The latter is in agreement with Sa'adat's (1998) findings which confirmed that hours allocated to teaching English in high schools is insufficient. In most cases, the English education in Iranian high schools focuses on teaching grammar and vocabulary through the different language skills with less emphasis on communicative skills. The linguistic orientation involves repetitive and mechanic speaking tasks, old and out-dated readings. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that English is a foreign language in Iran only one session during the week is devoted to English for grades two and three. On the other hand, it is also noteworthy that in most Iranian high schools, teaching English involves large classes (Rashidi, 1995) and limited school facilities and learning materials Sa'adat's (1998); most high schools do not possess enough resources to lead students to become communicatively competent speakers (Rahimi, 1995). Therefore, students may consider English to be a

tedious subject. It was also found that 'Poor method of teaching' was reported to be the most frequent demotivating aspect of the 'Teaching Styles and Methodology'. This finding is in line with Dörnyei's (1998) finding. In his study the participants reported the teaching method as one of the demotivating factors. Of many teacher's behaviours, students also perceived the 'English teacher's demand and strictness' to be more demotivating and it was also more demotivating for girls. It indicates that female teachers are stricter than male teachers or maybe girls are more sensitive than boys.

5. Conclusion

'Inadequate School Facilities', 'overemphasis on grammar', 'the long reading texts', along with plenty of new words, seemed to scale down students' motivation. To avoid this, new reading texts need to be selected with interesting topics, which contain more daily and practical words. According to Gibbs (1992) the course material and the opportunities for students to interact with the material can motivate/demotivate students to learn. 'Expectancy to use grammatically correct English in the classroom' and 'less emphasis on conversation inside the class' was also considered demotivating. Furthermore, boys perceived 'Teachers' Competence and Teaching Styles' as a demotivating factor. 'Poor methods of teaching' and 'very demanding and strict teachers' were found to scale down students' motivation to learn English. Therefore, teachers need to be careful about their teaching behaviours in the classrooms. Changes of behaviour in teachers when ensued can be studied in different situations to see how different contexts can affect the demotivation of language learners. This study has shed light on some of the sources of demotivation in Iran and the researchers hope other sources will be found as well.

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